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"Access to Information in the People's Republic of China"

It is a great pleasure to share my views with you today on mass media in China, which for the last five years has been the focus of my academic research. Before commencing, I would like to express my gratitude to the Commission for inviting me to appear before you.

The questions I will address today are as follows:

- How is the media controlled in China?
- How has commercialization of media operations since the late 1970s affected media content?
- Has the internet led to greater media freedom?
- What is the effect of media control on U.S.-China relations?

Most people who know about the political system in the People's Republic realize that media operations and media content are tightly controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This means the CCP, and supporting governmental institutions, can largely determine what appears in the news reports and what does not. Controlling media content allows the Communist Party to disseminate propaganda supportive of government policies, ban controversial news stories, and request news stories criticizing political adversaries, whether those adversaries are scholars arguing on behalf of democratization, advocates of religious freedom, Taiwanese nationalists, or representatives of the United States government.

Recently, there has been one notable change in the system of media control in China intended to conceal the nature of press censorship. In the past, the CCP's Central Propaganda Department and its local branches sent faxes to all media throughout the country with instructions indicating subjects news media should stress or avoid entirely. Now, directives concerning media content are imparted to ranking media managers or editors during phone conversations—a move designed to reduce the paper trail that could reveal the specifics of news stories the ruling party seeks to suppress. Ironically, due to the complexities of suppressing the news in large organizations, some media

organizations type out these Propaganda Department's directives in order to ensure they are implemented without mistakes; the paper trail re-emerges, so to speak, as media seek to comply with party demands for controlling news content. Groups of seasoned cadres at central and local levels closely scrutinize media content to ensure compliance with the CCP's ideological positions and restrictions on content deemed politically controversial, reflecting negatively on the party or the nation, generally, or likely to spark domestic unrest.

While some foreign journalists say they are having an easier time after the lifting of a restriction this January requiring prior approval for interviews, most Chinese journalists do not foresee liberalization of the media prior to the 17th Party Congress this fall or in the run up to the Beijing Olympics in 2008.

From Party Mouthpieces to State-owned Enterprises

The last two decades have witnessed monumental changes in how media operate in China. Prior to the late 1970s, the majority of mass media with a broad reach were party organs reliant on state subsidies and subscription by government bodies. Since 1979 nearly all media commercialized to a considerable degree. Profitable media now cater to the public's desire for more information about sports, arts and leisure, travel, fashion, crime, international affairs, and science and technology. Media face few restrictions with regard to content that is not of a political nature or seen by the CCP as politically controversial.

As a result of commercialization, the number of Chinese media as well as the range of media content has grown considerably. The fortunes of media reporting on issues of concern to the public have soared, while news media that focus on the doings of officials, Communist Party meetings, government policy, and so on have suffered a declined in popularity. Has commercialization, however, led to freedom for Chinese media to tackle controversial political subjects?

Over the last few years I have worked with researchers to analyze the content of more than 11,000 newspaper articles published in 10 newspapers in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou from 1980 to 2003. My findings were surprising: The freedom to criticize powerful state institutions and governmental policy has actually decreased over time; publication of opposing perspectives in news reports has fallen slightly, while the frequency of regime propaganda—especially propaganda relating to local government—has shown a considerable increase. (See the figure "Trends in Chinese Media Freedom" appearing below.) [1]

In China, media scholars have observed that commercial media have the freedom to "swat flies, mosquitoes and dead tigers," an expression that refers to news stories about topics of minor political sensitivity or officials who have already been convicted of a crime. Out all of the reports analyzed in my study, not a single news story was identified that criticized a central government leader by name! There was zero direct criticism of

[1] This figure reflects trends in four newspapers in my sample for which data was available in 1980, 1988, and 2003. The newspapers were: *People's Daily (Renmin ribao), Liberation Daily (Jiefang ribao), Southern Daily (Nanfang ribao)* and *Guangzhou Daily (Guangzhou ribao*

paramount leader Deng Xiaoping, former President Jiang Zemin, President Hu Jintao or even members of the powerful Politburo Standing Committee. My study also revealed that commercialized newspapers publish more propaganda than so-called party mouthpieces, or papers that print the views of national or provincial party committees.

Although commercial papers do publish minor criticism, they seldom take on powerful political adversaries. One paper that did so in 2003, the *Southern Metro Post* (*Nanfang dushibao*), saw its editor-in-chief Cheng Yizhong detained for several months in 2004 and two top managers imprisoned on corruption charges in an act seen by Chinese journalists as retribution for aggressive reporting on the spread of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and the murder of graphic artist Sun Zhigang, while he was held in a Guangzhou prison.

To summarize, commercialized media cater to popular preferences for non-political news while eschewing stories that could risk political repression. With few exceptions, the profitability of commercial media during the present advertising boom in China provides an incentive to avoid, rather than pursue, journalism leading to conflict with powerful authorities.

The Internet and Media Freedom

Without a doubt the most powerful force for increasing the free flow of information in China has been the explosion in internet use during the last decade. Recent estimates of internet use calculate the number of Chinese netizens at 137 million, or second only to the United States with an estimated 165 to 210 million users.[2] Although the system of media control system is capable of eliminating "undesirable" news before it enters the public sphere, the propaganda system is less effective at barring the emergence of unanticipated controversy via the internet.

Many of the exposés in recent years—including, for example, the 2007 story about the enslavement of hundreds of workers in Shanxi brick kilns—first appeared on the internet before being picked up by local Chinese media. Controversial information, therefore, becomes accessible via the internet even though it can be swiftly removed from internet portals after the CCP orders a media blackout.

The application of content analysis methods to the Chinese blogoshere has shown that blogs featuring content on social and economic stories have substantially higher levels of freedom and pluralism than mass circulation daily newspapers. In addition, these blogs have much lower levels of regime propaganda. (See the figure below "Media Content: A Comparative Perspective.") While the state regularly shuts down blogs containing politically sensitive content, bloggers often operate multiple blogs and start new blogs, if one becomes unusable. It is also harder for the Chinese government to eliminate

[2] Deborah Fallows, "China's Online Explosion: What it may mean for the internet globally… and for U.S. users," Pew Internet and American Life Project, July 2007; available at (accessed on July 30, 2007): http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/China_Internet_July_2007.pdf

politically sensitive information in the blogs than for web portals, which often have in-house censors.

As in the United States, where bloggers have proven to be vocal critics of corporations, politicians, celebrities, and a wide variety of social phenomena, bloggers in China have attacked government wrongdoing, misinformation in media reports, and stimulated criticism and even popular resistance to government policy. Due to concerns about personal safety, Chinese bloggers voice critiques of politics and society in indirect or vague language or even satire.

In the spring of 2007, Zhong Xiaoyong, who blogs under the name Lian Yue, was one of the leading critics of the construction of a chemical plant to manufacture paraxylene (PX), a petrochemical used to make synthetic fabrics, near the attractive seaside metropolis of Xiamen in Fujian Province. Investment in the plant was valued in excess of $600 million; the project was the largest ever approved in the city. Zhong bravely used his blog as a platform for urging Xiamen residents to speak to friends, family and colleagues about construction of the factory. [3] Partially as a result of his activism as well as that of other bloggers, some one million Xiamen residents circulated cell phone text messages, one of which likened the PX factory to dropping an "atom bomb" on the city. Subsequent demonstrations in which as many as 10,000 people participated led to suspension of the project.

While Chinese reporters were reportedly advised not to write stories about the controversy, Zhong Xiaoyong said he felt comparatively free of pressure to be silent, observing "As for me, I don't rely on any work unit, so I had less to worry about. If I had been working a regular job, I couldn't have done it". [4]

Restrictions on Information and U.S.-China Relations

In July 2007, a senior editor in Beijing remarked to me that President George W. Bush's administration has provided invaluable assistance to the Chinese Communist Party leadership, which through state-controlled media characterizes the Iraq War in an extremely negative light, while portraying the Communist Party as responsible for unprecedented peace and prosperity. Clearly, restrictions on the free flow of information in China allow the party-state to powerfully shape the views of its citizens as long as they continue to believe official news reports.

It bears noting that Chinese are well aware that the CCP controls media content; the CPP knows that propaganda works best when a citizenry does not have access to credible, alternate sources of information. Therefore, the party-state works to ensure that pro-

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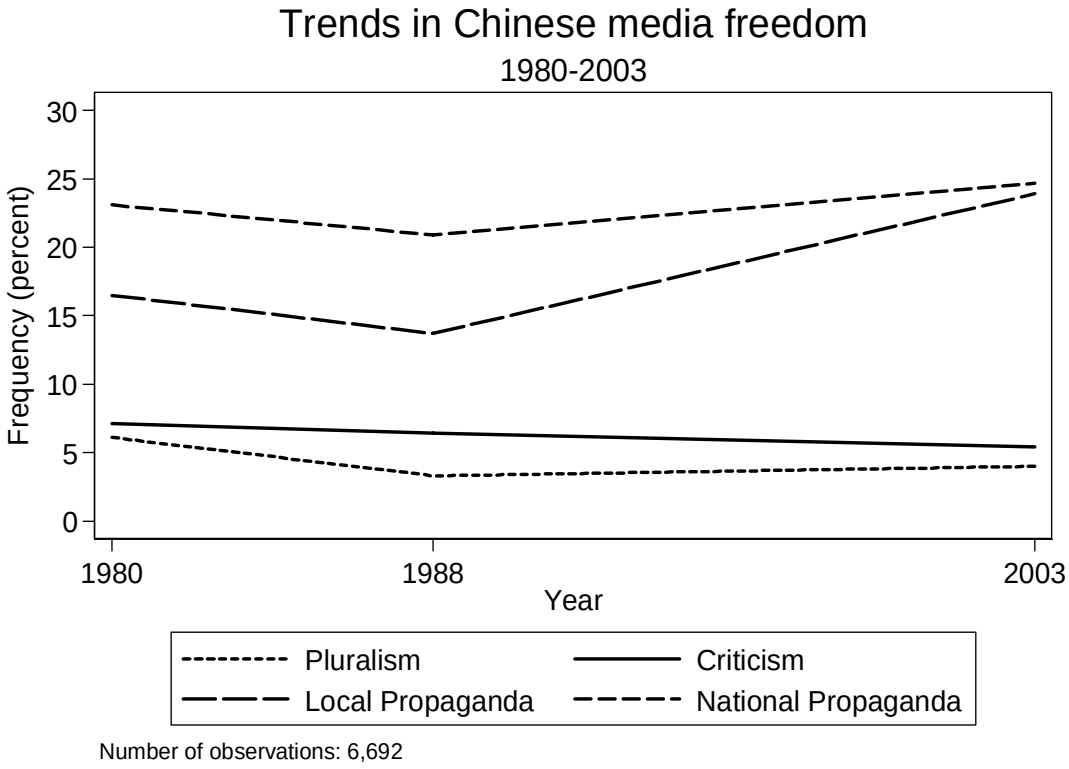
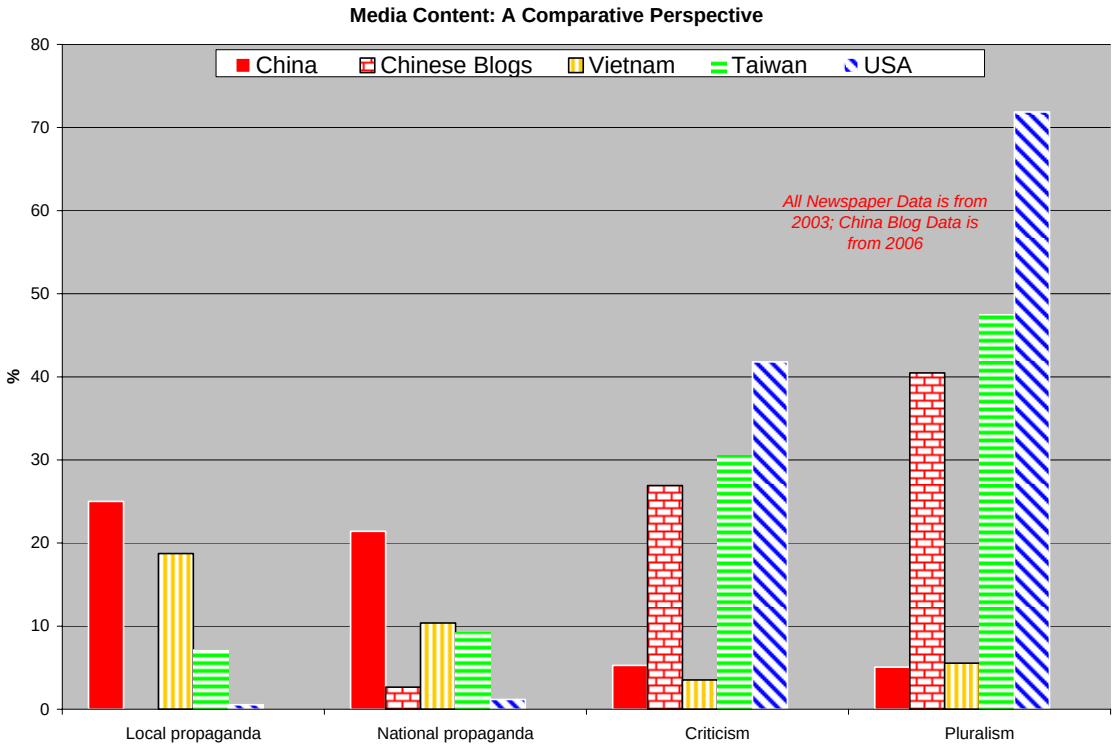
[3] For related media coverage in the United States see, Mitchell Landsberg, "Chinese Activists Turn to Cell Phones," *Los Angeles Times*, June 1, 2007.

[4] . See also, Edward Cody, "Text Messages Giving Voice to Chinese: Opponents of Chemical Factory Found Way around Censors," *Washington Post*, June 28, 2007.

regime propaganda is largely, if not completely, factually accurate and thus more effective in influencing public opinion.

To date, the internet has provided Chinese with the most unfettered access to truth. Although due to the removal of controversial content, the appearance of truth can be fragile and fleeting. Under such conditions the CCP—rather than foreign media, the U.S. government, or informed citizens—holds the upper hand in determining how Chinese view their country's relationship with the United States.





This figure reflects analysis of more than 9,000 articles in 2003 appearing in the following newspapers: China: *People's Daily (Renmin ribao), Beijing Morning News (Beijing chenbao), Beijing Youth Daily (Beijing Qingnianbao), Beijing Youth Daily (Beijing Qingnianbao), Liberation Daily (Jiefang ribao), Oriental Morning Post (Dongfang zaobao), Shanghai Morning News (Xinwen chenbao), Southern Daily (Nanfang ribao), Southern Metro Post (Nanfang dushibao), Guangzhou Daily (Guangzhou ribao)*; Vietnam: *The People (Nhan Dan), Saigon Liberation (Saigon giaiphong)*; Taiwan: *China Times (Zhongguo shibao), United Daily (Lianhebao)*; United States: *The New York Times and The Washington Post*. A total of 865 log posts mentioning reportage in the above Chinese newspapers listed were also analyzed.